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“And we bring you good of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Origin of Christmas

One never reads of “Christmas” upon the pages of the New Testament. You never learn where the early Christians, under the inspired guidance of the apostles, celebrated the birth of Jesus, much less discover from God-inspired writers that December 25 was the day Jesus was born. Yet, many today who claim to be followers of Jesus will soon flock to churches, view church plays and hear concerts commemorating the day as one of the “Christian festivals.”

Since “Christmas” does not originate in the inspired Word of God, what exactly is its origin?

You might suspect the word “Christ-mas” might have some connection with the Roman Catholic Church. According to their records, the first time “Christmas” appears is in 1038 as “*Cristes Maesse*” - the “Mass of Christ”. Even today the Pope will hold mass at midnight ushering in Christmas day.

The celebration of Jesus’ birthday does not appear in history before the fourth century. The early church fathers, Irenaeus, and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts. Celebrating Jesus’ birthday on December 25 as a church festival was not practiced in Rome before A.D. 336.

In Jerusalem, the birth of Jesus was coupled with His baptism, and celebrated together on January 6 until at least A.D. 549.

Hippolytus, who lived in the third century, and wrote among other works, a commentary on Daniel, seems to have been the first to center upon December 25 as the day of Jesus’ birth. He supposed Jesus, from conception, lived exactly 33 years, and that conception and death occurred on March 25. Count nine months from March 25, and you got it, December 25 is established as the day of Jesus’ birth.

Written records show May 20, April 18 or 19, and March 28 were also dates some believed to be Jesus’ birthday. Even Hippolytus himself once believed that January 2 was the day of Jesus’ birth. So, establishing December 25 as the day of Jesus’ birth is based upon uncertain suppositions, and has not been universally accepted.

Why has December 25 persisted to be the day of Jesus’ birth instead of other dates throughout history?

One plausible reason may lie in the pagan world. There was a pagan festival in place before the

celebration of Christmas. It was the festival celebrating the week of the shortest day of the year (December 17-24), and the “new sun” (December 25), or the beginning of the lengthening of days. Much joy and merrymaking were connected with this celebrated festival. Since the pagan festival was already entrenched in society, and not likely to go away, some believe that fourth century Christians felt “the appropriateness of making the birthday of the Son of God coincide with that of the physical sun” (*The New Schaff – Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. III, p. 48*).

The celebration of December 25, and Christmas as Jesus’ birthday may have its origin in paganism, but it has been definitely promoted in Catholicism. December 25, as the date of Jesus’ birth, hinges upon uncertain data, and suppositions. Celebrating “Christmas” (December 25) as Jesus’ birthday does not originate with God. Nor is it established in Scripture as a “Christian festival.” As New Testament Christians, we can respond to those who decry Jesus being taken out of “Christmas” by reminding them that from the beginning, God never put Jesus in such a festival commemorating His incarnation.